

EDITORIALS

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Switch to one-day, one-trial jury system will save money

Beginning next month, the Macomb County Circuit Court will switch, at least temporarily, to a one-day, one-trial system for those called to jury duty.

Court officials say the new system, if successful, could become permanent in 2006.

While applauding the change in jury service, we discount the idea of making it a temporary experiment. To catch up with neighboring counties, we need assurance the plan will work and we can count on it in the coming year.

The county needs to do more than just try out the one-day, one-trial format. It should send a message to all the participants that this will not be a temporary adventure. Through positive application, the changeover should come early next year, and the county had better be ready to make it work effectively and efficiently.

By moving ahead with the new format, we can say it's a change long overdue.

County Clerk Carmella Sabaugh, who has been pushing for the one-day, one-

trial system for the past few years, said that the call to civic duty can be an expensive inconvenience for some and a boring experience for many.

"These people are there for days, and it is just totally boring. And most of these people are working or have kids, so it's really a hardship."

Under the current system, prospective jurors, identified by driver licenses, receive a notice in the mail to report on a Tuesday. On the first day, they are given a telephone number to call each night to find out if they are to report the next day.

But in most cases, the members of the jury pool are required to report at 8 a.m. each morning. About 150 jurors report each Tuesday but only two to four trials proceed by the end of the week. In many cases, last-minute settlements or plea bargains are reached that cancel the need for a trial.

The end results tell the tale. Only about 13 percent of the 12,000 people summoned each year are selected for a trial.

Jury pay is \$25 for the first day and \$40 for each subsequent day.

Some employers, particularly those with union workers, make up the difference in lost wages.

The majority, however, face the possibility of baby-sitting fees and the cost of eating lunch at a restaurant.

The one-day, one-jury system, therefore, seems to be a win-win situation for both the prospective jurors and the circuit court.

The jurors avoid not knowing whether they'll be required to report the next day, and the court will likely save money by paying fewer persons for reporting each day.

If the change becomes permanent in January, Macomb will join Wayne, Oakland and Washtenaw counties in adopting the one-day, one-trial jury system.

"It's working just fine in other counties," said Judge Antonio Viviano, who became chief jurist in January. "The goal here is to make jury service more convenient to the public."

We couldn't agree more.